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ABSTRACT

Reaching an employee whose job performance is deteriorating due to substance abuse, personal concerns or emotional problems, is one of the most difficult and most avoided tasks presented supervisors, coworkers and/or union stewards. Yet, when such problems do exist and do effect job performance, (and perhaps the work and safety of coworkers) clear decisive action must be taken. A proven method for taking such action is the constructive confrontation strategy. Constructive confrontation is a pragmatic and humanistic workplace-based intervention strategy designed to address deteriorating job performance while offering help and assistance to troubled employees. (Six components of constructive intervention, as well as examples of good and bad intervention are included.) (Author/PRA)

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PRAGMATIC HUMANISM IN THE WORKPLACE: REACHING THE TROUBLED EMPLOYEE VIA THE CONSTRUCTIVE CONFRONTATION STRATEGY

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ABSTRACT

Reaching an employee whose job performance is deteriorating due to substance abuse, personal concerns or emotional problems, is one of the most difficult and most often avoided tasks presented supervisors, coworkers and/or union stewards. Yet, when such problems do exist and do affect job performance, (and perhaps the work and safety of coworkers) clear decisive action must be taken. A proven method for taking such action is the **constructive confrontation strategy.** Constructive confrontation is a pragmatic and humanistic workplace-based intervention strategy designed to address deteriorating job performance while offering help and assistance to troubled employee.

Is it possible for the philosophies of pragmatism and humanism to coexist in the same ideology? If pragmatism is a philosophy that tests the value and truth of ideas by their practical consequences while humanism deals with the feelings and unique experiences of human beings, it seems unreasonable that they could work in tandem. Yet, it is that synergy that is the ideological underpinning of the workplace communication strategy of **constructive confrontation.** Within this strategy, supervisors identify troubled employees* on the basis of deteriorating job performance and motivate employees to resolve their troubles and improve their performance. Constructive confrontation means that supervisors, peers and/or union stewards confront employees with evidence of their unsatisfactory job performance, coach them on ways to improve their work, urge them to use the services of the **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** if they have personal problems, and, at the same time, emphasize to them the consequences of continued poor performance (Sonnenstuhl and Trice, 1990).

The concept of constructive confrontation rises from sociological theory, Alcoholic Anonymous experiences and personnel practices. Unlike the counseling approach, the constructive confrontation strategy <u>does not</u> utilize the professional-client relationships in the therapeutic setting (Sonnenstuhl and Trice, 1990), nor does it attempt to clinically diagnose the troubled employee. The strategy is enacted by communicating the specifics of the troubled employee's declining job performance (confrontation) with a clear and empathetic offer for assistance (constructive). Research from industrial alcoholism studies show that when this strategy is properly implemented, most employees either will change their behavior or will seek help from the EAP services before disciplinary action is initiated. In unionized facilities,

stewards also informally urge employees to improve performance and resolve their troubles. In many instances, employees are also encouraged by their coworkers to seek help (Sonnenstuhl and Trice, 1990).

The strategy initially evolved as a technique for identifying employed alcoholics and for counteracting the psychodynamics of alcoholism-guilt, denial, rationalization and manipulation (Donovan et al., 1977; Kellerman, 1970; Paredes, 1974; Pennoch and Poudrier, 1978; Trice, 1962a; Trice and Roman, 1978). Other emotional and physical disorders also are characterized by these psychodynamics (Schur, 1979), but they are particularly pronounced in highly stigmatized health problems such as alcoholism, drug addiction, and the psychoses. As a consequence, addicts and severely disturbed people are exceptionally difficult to help. It is with these groups that the strategy can be used most successfully (Sonnenstuhl and Trice, 1990).

The constructive confrontation technique is based on both academic and applied research and basic industrial relations practices that suggest that most people can be motivated to change if they receive appropriate feedback about their behavior (Sonnenstuhl and Trice, 1990). The strategy solves the problem of identifying troubled employees by adopting a **pragmatic** definition for the troubled employee that is based on job performance. The strategy maintains the **humanistic** qualities of caring and helping by offering assistance through the EAP or other appropriate community services.

* **Troubled Employees** refers to those individuals whose personal problems (such as alcoholism, drug addiction, marital difficulties, and emotional disorders) preoccupy them to the extent that, in either their own or their supervisor's judgement, their work is disrupted.

THE SIX KEY COMPONENTS OF CONSTRUCTIVE INTERVENTION

There are three basic types of constructive intervention: (1) manager/supervisor, (2) joint supervisor/union steward, and (3) peer. Each of these interventions is unique because of the people involved, the roles being filled, the setting in which the intervention occurs, and the situation driving the intervention. (For instance, peers can confront troubled co-workers on actions which are not directly related to job performance, whereas supervisors are confined by principles of industrial jurisprudence solely to job performance issues.) Despite these circumstantial differences, the objective of all constructive interventions remains the same: To break thrcugh the denial of the troubled employee and offer assistance for personal troubles through the EAP. Note that all types of work place interventions incorporate the same six key components:

1. Recognition and documentation of deteriorating job performance. This documentation is done in consultation with others. At this stage, the supervisor is not a clinician; however, he/she is diagnosing job performance.

2. Request for a meeting. The supervisor asks the employee to meet in private. (In the case of peer interventions, this "request" may be much less formal. The key point is to talk with the troubled worker privately.)

3. The constructive component of the meeting. The supervisor/peer is empathetic but firm.

4. The confrontive component of the meeting. The supervisor/peer presents the employee with documented evidence of deteriorating performance. (Peers may also discuss other types of inappropriate behaviors.)

5. Be honest and realistic in regard to job performance. State explicitly those expectations the employee is suppose to fulfill. Avoid vague generalities (i.e., "You really have to try harder...").

6. Offer the use of the employee assistance program on a confidential basis.

SUPERVISOR/MANAGER INTERVENTION

LITTLE VENICE RESTAURANT

BAD INTERVENTION

SETTING: A BAR/RESTAURANT. IT IS 5:00 PM. NANCY ELLIS, THE DAYTIME BARTENDER IS GOING OFF DUTY. JIM PEARSON, THE EVENING BARTENDER, IS COMING ON DUTY. THE MOOD BETWEEN THE TWO IS FRIENDLY, BUT NOT TOO FRIENDLY. NANCY IS BEHIND THE BAR AS JIM COMES INTO WORK AND ALSO GOES BEHIND THE BAR. . .

Nancy: Hi Jim. How are ya doing.

Jim: Eh...OK...I've had better days. Anything I should know about for tonight?

Nancy: No. . .you're all stocked up and ready to go. I've checked, all the booze and the coolers are full. . .(slight pause). . .and that's not the way I found it when I came in this morning.

Jim: I just didn't get a chance last night to. . .

Nancy: (cutting Jim off). . .last night you didn't stock the bar . . .two nights last week you didn't stock the bar. . .

Jim: I was busy. . .Why are you getting on my case Nancy? I thought you and I were friends.

Nancy: Yeah we're friends all right. . .(Nancy waves Jim off. . . grabs herself a coke and walks away.

Nancy goes to a booth where HANK CORDI, the owner of the bar/restaurant is sitting. Nancy sits opposite Hank. Hank knows that Nancy and Jim were having a disagreement but he did not hear everything).

Hank: What's the problem Nancy?

Nancy: You know what the problem is Hank. The problem today is the same problem we had yesterday. . .the same problem we had last week. You know what the problem is.

Hank: (cuts off Nancy) I know...I know... Jim's not stocking the bar... he comes in late sometimes...some times he doesn't show up.

(While Hank is talking, Jim is behind the bar pouring some liquor into a glass.. he takes a long drink.)

Nancy: He drinks on the job...just like he's doing right now. Our customers complain that he's downright nasty sometimes and I'm sick and tired of covering up for him...

Hank I know...I know... and the waitresses complain that he's slow in filling orders..

Nancy: ...and he gets them mixed up sometimes...How long has Jim been working for you Hank?

Hank: About three years...(Hank is starting to get angry)

Nancy: How long have you been putting up with this crap?

Hank: (getting angrier) ...about three years...

Hank: (he can't take anymore.. he walks hurriedly toward the bar and explodes as Jim takes a drink) ...What the hell are you doing Jim?

Jim: (defensively)..I'm just having a glass of coke....

Hank: Baloney with that crap.. you know you've got some rum in there...

Jim: (very nervous)...no, I don't...

Hank: Jim..you know there's rum in that glass..don't try to bullshit me...

Jim: ..just a little...

Hank: (very upset) What the hell am I going to do with you Jim? You're drinking on the job all night. You get the waitress orders all screwed up..(Jim tries to interrupt but Hank won't let him).. You're late to work a couple of times a week. You don't show up to work sometimes.. 2-3 times in just the last month..

Jim: (interrupting) ..but I was sick.. I couldn't come to work.

Hank: (Obviously not even listening to Jim)...the customers at the bar tell me they don't know what to expect from you.. One night your fine.. and the next night you're insulting them and giving everybody a hard time.

Jim: Who told you that?

Hank: (still not listening) .. and some nights when you walk out of here... you walk like your a drunken bum...

Jim: (defensive and angry)..I'm not a drunken bum...

Hank: Jim, you know you've got a bad drinking problem...You've been drinking on the job here for three years... and that's why you don't show up for work a couple of times a month.

(By this time a few customers in the bar listening to the argument are uneasy.)

Jim: I don't have a drinking problem... and if all of this other crap has been bothering you, why didn't you mention this before today... Hank, I've been working for you for three years.

Hank: That's right Jim... we've been putting up with you for three years.. for three years you haven't been doing your job.

Jim: Well... I'm not going to put up with your accusations any more. I've been doing good work for three years.. I don't have a drinking problem... and you can take this job and shove it...

(Jim walks off the job and out the door as Hank and the customers look on.)

SUPERVISOR/MANAGER INTERVENTION

LITTLE VENICE RESTAURANT

GOOD INTERVENTION

SETTING: A BAR/RESTAURANT. IT IS 5:00 PM. NANCY ELLIS, THE DAYTIME BARTENDER IS GOING OFF DUTY. JIM PEARSON, THE EVENING BARTENDER, IS COMING ON DUTY. THE MOOD BETWEEN THE TWO IS FRIENDLY, BUT NOT TOO FRIENDLY. NANCY IS BEHIND THE BAR AS JIM COMES INTO WORK AND ALSO GOES BEHIND THE BAR. . .

Nancy: Hi Jim. How are ya doing.

Jim: Eh, o.k. I've had better days. Anything I should know about for tonight?

Nancy: No. . .you're all stocked up and ready to go. I've checked, all the booze and the coolers are full. . .(slight pause). . .and that's not the way I found it when I came in this morning.

Jim: I just didn't get a chance last night to. . .

Nancy: (cutting Jim off). . .last night you didn't stock the bar . . .two nights last week you didn't stock the bar. . .

Jim: I was busy. . .Why are you getting on my case Nancy? I thought you and I were friends.

Nancy: Yeah we're friends all right. . .(Nancy waves Jim off. . . grabs herself a coke and walks away.

Nancy goes to a booth where HANK CORDI, the owner of the bar/restaurant is sitting. Nancy sits opposite Hank. Hank knows that Nancy and Jim were having a disagreement but he did not hear everything).

Hank: What's the problem Nancy?

Nancy: You know what the problem is Hank. The problem today is the same problem we had yesterday. . .the same problem we had last week. You know what the problem is.

Hank: I don't know what the problem is until you tell me. What's the problem?

Nancy: He didn't stock the bar before he went home last night. I came in this morning and we didn't have any booze. . .the coolers were empty. . .

Hank: (as Nancy is talking Hank is writing in a notebook). . and this is the first time that this has happened?

Nancy: No. . .he didn't stock the bar one night last week.

Hank: Why didn't you tell me this last week?

Nancy: Hank. . .I thought you knew all about Jim's problems. . .

Hank: Sure I know the waitresses have complained occasionally about Jim mixing up their orders. . .(Hank looks down at this notebook to consult his notes). . but nothing really major. . .

Nancy: Well, how about his drinking on the job? Just look at him. . .(cut to shot of Jim sipping on a drink)

Hank: I've seen him drinking some. . .but whenever I've asked him about it, he assured me it was just coke.

Nancy: Hank, you'd better check that glass. . .he's lacing his coke with your rum.

Hank: Thanks for filling me in Nancy. . . (Nancy leaves and Hank gets up from the booth and he goes over to talk to Gloria Minni, one of his waitresses).

Hank: Gloria. . .

Gloria: Yes Hank. . .

Hank: I was just chatting with Nancy and she mentioned some problems with Jim. . .Have you noticed anything?

Gloria: Well. . .I told you about the orders that he mixes up once in a while. . .

Hank: Anything else?

Gloria: Well. . .(hesitant to speak out, but she finally does) I don't want to get Jim in trouble. . .you remember when he called in sick last Wednesday and couldn't come into work. .

Hank: Right. . .

Gloria: You know. . .he was so hung over from booze. . .he couldn't even stand up. . .I don't want to cause any troubled. . .and besides don't you check things out?

Hank: He told me that it was his sinus headaches. . .he was out of his mind with pain. . .

Gloria: (Gloria nods in agreement). . .the same sinus headache that he had the week before last. . .

Hank: (as he consults his notebook). . .that's right. . .the week of the 17th. . .

Gloria: And you know about his problems with the customers at the bar. . .as he drinks more and more each night. . .the insults get louder and louder. . .

Hank: Thanks, Gloria. . .(he walks up to the bar. . .calls Jim over and says) Jim. . .I'd like to have a talk with you . . can you stop by my office tomorrow at four. Make sure you punch in first.

Jim: Sure Hank.

Hank: Great! I'll see you then.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON:

(Hank is sitting at his desk in his office. . .Jim pokes his head in the door. . .Hank acknowledges him)

Hank: Come on in Jim, Have a seat.

Jim: What's going on Hank.

Hank: Jim, you've been with me three years. I consider you a valued employee and on the whole your performance has been good but the past three months its been horrible.

Jim: C'mon Hank--Horrible? I hardly think so.

Hank: Jim, you've got to understand I've got obligations to my customers and to my employees--your performance is costing me in both these areas.

Jim: How?

Hank: For instance:

10/7: One hour late. . .car trouble. . .had to keep Nancy overtime.

10/9: Nancy called me over. . .nothing was stocked. . .place was dirty.

10/15:Called in sick. . .sinus headache

10/20: Three phone calls from customers complaining about you saying you were insulting.

11/1: Dropped two bottles. . .lost grip on shaker drink. . .soaked customer. . .cost me a new suit.

11/3: Called in sick. . .sinus headache.

11/8: Two hours late. . .finally called in. . .car broke down. . will not be in.

11/10: Drinks for wait staff mixed up. . .Gloria ended up in tears. you called her a stupid ignorant bitch.

11/22: Lost two customers waiting for a table. . .they inquired of you about a drink order and you told them if they didn't like the speed at which you worked they could leave.

12/3: Bar filthy,. . .nothing stocked. . .fruit left out all night. . .drawer not cashed out.

12/10: Called in sick. . .sinus headache

Hank: That's the last three months, Jim.

Jim: You write all that down?

Hank: Yes, Jim and I also write down positive things but lately there is none of them. Your performance is not up to par. I must have better performance. If your poor performance continues, I will have no choice but to follow our standard discipline procedure which could ultimately result in your dismissal.

Jim: Gosh, I need my job. . .what can I do. . .Oh God (head in hands)

Hank: Jim, realize I'll help anyway I can. . .if your schedule needs adjusting. . .if you need a different shift. . .let me know. . .I'll help.

Jim: Thanks. . .it's not any of those.

Hank: Jim, remember the employee meeting when we talked about our Employee Assistance Program and Bill was here from Family and Children Services.

Jim: Yeah, I think so.

Hank: I contracted with them to help my employees and families whose personal problems may be effecting their work. Jim if something is going on in your life that is getting out of hand. . .please give them a call. . .there is no cost to you and its completely confidential, here's the number.

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